Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 3

Scepticism: Hume

Summary of Berkeley's views. The principal views relevant for later discussion are as follows. (*a*) We directly only perceive our own ideas. (*b*) Material objects may cause our ideas; however, this causal connection between them is not perceived (or perceivable in principle). (*c*) Material objects have the property of being unobserved. (*d*) Material objects and *their* qualities are similar to some of the ideas we have in our minds. (*e*) Material objects so conceived are unintelligible. (*f*) Reality consists of my mind ('spirit'), its ideas, other finite minds, their ideas, and God's mind, and Its ideas.

The map of T 1.4.2. Since the discussion in this section Hume's *Treatise* is fairly complex in content and at crucial junctures non-linear in development, it is useful to delineate its structure:

1 The sceptical problem posed.

2 Continued and distinct existence distinguished; sense, reason, and imagination identified as only possible sources of our belief in the body (BB), i.e. the belief in the 'external world' as it is usually called.

3-4 Senses are not supplied with an impression of either continued or distinct existence.

5-7 If senses *were* to generate BB, then only through an illusion; but senses *cannot* represent our perceptions as either external or independent.

8-10 In any case, senses *do not* in fact represent our perceptions as external or independent.

12 Three kinds of impressions distinguished (1- and 2-qualities, passions); the Philosophical and the Vulgar views introduced: the Philosophers believe in the distinct and continued existence of 1-qualities, the Vulgar believe in the distinct and continued existence of both 1-qualities and 2-qualities. Neither believe in the distinct and continued existence of passions.

13 Senses cannot be responsible either for the Philosophical or the Vulgar view.

14 One of the densest paragraphs. The doctrine of double existence introduced. It is affirmed by the Philosophers, rejected by the Vulgar. Reason cannot be responsible for the Vulgar view. It cannot be responsible for the Philosophical view, but the argument is postponed till §47. Imagination is posited as the real source of BB.

15 We must discover the features of the impressions that make imagination induce BB in us.

16 Involuntariness is not such a feature.

17-19 Constancy and coherence seem to be exactly the features we are looking for.

20-22 Coherence examined and found wanting in the support of BB.

23 Constancy is stated to be chief element in the creation of BB: constancy creates the belief in the continued existence of the body.

24-25 Outline of the 'system'.

26-30 Principle of individuation explained: it is rooted in the temporal succession of similar impressions. It is ultimately nothing but a fiction (creation) of imagination.

31-36 Despite interruptions in the series of similar perceptions, the mind, through 'error and deception' (32), is led to treat them as identical.

37-40 Nevertheless, faced with interruptions, the mind is torn between the presumed identity of similar perceptions and their distinctness due precisely to interruptions. The mind finds relief in the fiction of continued existence.

41-42 The origin of the *belief* in this fiction.

43 The Vulgar view owes its origin to the apparent constancy of perceptions.

44 But we cannot ascribe independent existence to perceptions.

45 This is confirmed by the experiments demonstrating perceptual illusions.

46 Hence we should adopt the Philosophical view that distinguishes between perceptions and objects. Only the latter are supposed to have independent existence.

47 The Philosophical view is not supported by reason (as advertised in §14).

48 The Philosophical view is not supported by imagination: i.e. the perception-object distinction is not a product of imagination. For imagination can only operate on perceptions.

49-50 So imagination, left to its devices, leads to the abolition of the double existence doctrine and thus to the Vulgar view. But since the independent existence of perceptions is indefensible, the conclusion must be that neither objects, nor perceptions have independent existence. But this view is not believable, whatever 'extravagant sceptics' maintain.

52-53 The irresolvable conflict the mind finds itself in: the Vulgar view cannot be defended by minimal reflection, the sceptical option, i.e. the total rejection of BB, is not credible ('Nature is obstinate, and will not quit the field'), and the Philosophical view fails as well in its attempts to reconcile the other two views.

54 The centrality of causal reasoning is reaffirmed.

55 The resemblance between perceptions and objects rests on their past occurrences in causal relations.

56-57 Concluding remarks: scepticism cannot be answered, yet is contrary to our nature.

The problem of the external world. Right at the beginning Hume announces that he is not after a proof of the existence of the external world. But this admission is somewhat misleading, as what Hume says in the course of his discussion has clear sceptical ramifications. Presumably Hume's position is as follows: We have the belief in the existence of external objects, and the fact of this belief is non-negotiable. We cannot in all seriousness and honesty contemplate the possibility of there being no external objects whatsoever. What is left for us to examine is whether this belief is justifiable (in some sense of 'justifiable'). T 1.4.2.1

We begin with a distinction between two beliefs: (1) that objects of the external world (or 'body', as Hume prefers to label it) exist even when not perceived by the mind, and (2) that they are distinct from the mind. T 1.4.2.2

The first belief entails the second: if the objects exist unperceived, they should be distinct from perceptions. Hume then asks whether reason, senses, or imagination should be responsible for these beliefs. To anticipate, the answer is *imagination*.

The vulgar and the philosophical. Hume distinguishes the vulgar and the philosophical ways of affirming the existence of the body. The vulgar, possibly on account of having no correct theory of mind and perception, believe that their perceptions continue uninterrupted. They thus conclude that perceptions constitute the ontology of the world. The philosophically inclined postulate a distinction between perceptions and objects, thus affirming the doctrine of 'double existence'. Objects, but not perceptions, continue uninterrupted. T 1.4.2.12

We can now read Hume as offering the sixfold argument mentioned above, to the effect that: senses are not the cause of either vulgar or philosophical belief in the external world, reason is not the cause of either vulgar or philosophical belief in the external world, imagination is a direct cause of the vulgar belief in the external world, imagination is an indirect cause of the philosophical belief in the external world.

Senses. Evidently the senses cannot supply us with the idea of *continued* existence of the body. For that would amount to the possibility of perceiving something unperceived. Perhaps, on the other hand, they can provide us with the idea of distinct existence. But that could mean either that they provide us with impressions *as* representations, or that they provide us with impressions *as* distinct from ourselves. The first possibility is quickly dismissed: we do not have the impression of double existence. T 1.4.2.3 T 1.2.4.4

What of the second? Being a distinct existence involves two ingredients: externality and independence. The issue of externality is dealt with briefly, but instructively. To perceive something externally I should perceive it outside of myself. We have no good theory of self. Perhaps I should at least insist that my perceptions should be outside of my body. But to say that is already to assume the existence of the external world—that we are supposed to be explaining. T 1.2.4.9

The issue of independence gets a slightly more elaborate treatment, but here we only note one argument. The senses can only inform us of what is, but not of what could be. Since independence is a modal notion, it cannot be channeled through senses alone. T 1.4.2.10

Reason. Can reason supply us with the idea of the external world? It could not supply us with the vulgar idea, since that idea is actually false. As for the philosophical idea, it should rest on the causal connection between objects and perceptions. But this idea, as we have already seen, is generated by imagination. Hence the only remaining candidate for the source of our idea of the external world is imagination. T 1.4.2.14

Imagination. So neither reason, nor senses can provide us with the idea of the external world. (Though as for reason, Hume has only advertised the argument he will give later in T 1.4.2.47. See below.) We are left with the possibility that imagination is the source of that idea. However, imagination cannot work unassisted. It must use some features of our impressions to generate the idea of the external world. Hume now proposes to discover precisely those features. All the while, until further notice, he assumes the 'vulgar belief' of existence that does not distinguish perceptions and objects.

Involuntariness. Hume begins by demolishing the 'involuntariness' argument endorsed, among others, by Berkeley. We were supposed to be able to distinguish between perceptions of objects and the phantoms of our mind by the fact that the latter, though not the former, can be manipulated by us. However, nobody would deny that anger, for example, has no existence 'beyond our perception'. Yet I may be subjected to anger involuntarily and lose control over it. So, Hume concludes, the involuntariness premiss is too weak to create a belief in the continued and distinct perceptions (what, in other words, amounts to the belief in the external world). T 1.4.2.16

One might wonder whether this dismissal is too hasty. It is true that I can lose self-control (the very expression is suggestive here) and give in to anger. But I can also regain self-control and refuse to give in to anger. What parallel do we have with sense perception? Can we exercise voluntary control over what we see (of course, with our senses engaged—eyes open etc.)? When I open my eyes and stare at the sky, I cannot train myself not to see the sky. Perhaps, on the other hand, I can deliberately choose what to see in a *gestalt* perceptual situation. I decide I am going to see the goblet or the old woman, and that is what I see. Or I can choose differently, and then see two faces or the young woman in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Gestalt perception